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ABSTRACT

Viewing truth and knowledge as intertextual phenomena, the theory of rhetoric-as-epistemic presented in this paper defines the consensus model as unanimity and the "discourse community" model as involving primary texts (rather than people). A theory of intertextual reality and knowledge is developed, based on five major assertions: (1) Even if truth and reality exist independently, humans have no direct access to it. (2) The meaning or truth of anything is extrinsic; that is, things, events, or words are dependent upon and defined by context. (3) Meaning or truth is always dynamic and ambiguous. (4) Knowledge is metaphor. And (5) Rhetoric-as-epistemic ought to be more concerned with theories of writing and reading than with theories of speaking and listening. The following three implications of rhetorical epistemology based on intertextuality are explored: that the traditional conception of writing must enlarge, that writing itself is "radicalized," and that if grammarology "erases" truth and the "logos," it will also erase any traditional concept of the human. Each implication suggests ways in which our concept of and relationship to writing should change or is already changing. (JD)

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Intertextual Knowledge:

A New Look at Rhetoric-as-Epistemic

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Conservative critics of epistemic rhetoricians often attack epistemic theories of rhetoric for their claim that knowledge and truth are social constructs born within the consensus of a discourse community. But such critics tend to understand the notion of "consensus" in a rather narrow way. One recent example is Richard Fulkerson's 1984 address to the Rhetoric Society of America, published in 1985 in the volume Oldspeak/Newspeak: Rhetorical Transformations. Fulkerson's article, which focuses its criticism on James Berlin and Barry Brunmet, attacks the notion that "the consensus of a discourse community is what determines truth"(197) by suggesting that, if the rhetoric-as-epistemic theorists are right, then minority viewpoints within a discourse community must be "attempting to purvey falsehoods." Fulkerson's concept of consensus, it seems, must be that a majority in a group constitutes a consensus.

In my address today, I will assume a different model of consensus and also a different model of a discourse community. I--and, I assume, the theorists whom he attacks--take consensus to mean unanimity. Within such a model, very little can be considered "true," and truth may not be considered permanent or eternal, for consensus is always a temporal phenomenon. More importantly, I want to reject the model of "discourse community" as what Fulkerson calls "the relevant qualified men and women," and replace it with a model that sees a discourse community primarily as texts, not as people. In other

words, I will suggest a theory of rhetoric-as-epistemic which, instead of defining truth and knowledge as intersubjective phenomena views them as intertextual phenomena. I will develop my theory of intertextual reality and intertextual knowledge in five steps, after which I will suggest three ways in which our concept of writing, and of our relationship to it, should change or is already changing.

My first point is that if there is a truth and a reality independent of humans, we have no direct access to it. This assumption is a disputed point within rhetorical epistemology. Those who dispute this point, like Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins, most likely claim that knowledge is "justified true belief," but I would argue that such a definition does not effectively argue against the idea that all knowledge is social and rhetorical. Cherwitz and Hikins argue, "The fact that people continually debate . . . inspect and reject certain claims while maintaining others, and attempt to persuade and dissuade, indicates that they hold there to be truth independent of thought and discussion"(142,143). For Cherwitz and Hikins, then, the notion of "truth" in "justified true belief" hinges on both "justification" and "belief," both of which are essentially rhetorical. Cherwitz and Hikins are correct in observing that most of us act as though there is "truth independent of thought and discussion," but that demonstration of belief cannot justify the truth claims they wish to make about the accessibility of absolute knowledge. Rhetorical epistemology instead should agree with Barry Brummet, who claims: "If objective reality exists,

people will never know it"(27).

My second point is that rhetoric-as-epistemic should assume that the meaning or truth of anything is extrinsic rather than intrinsic, in other words, that things, events, or words are subordinate to, dependent upon, and defined by context. Kenneth Burke, in A Grammar of Motives explores the idea of contextual definition. He argues that the only substance which could be considered as a thing-in-itself is the universe as a whole, for any single object within the universe is defined by and bounded by those things which surround it, and thus it cannot be considered separately from its context. No one mind or method, of course, can comprehend the universe as a whole. Each mind or method is one perspective or terministic screen which both reveals some things and conceals others. Any definition, then, is an "antinomy," or mutual contradiction of two principles, because "to define a thing in terms of its context, we must define it in terms of what it is not"(25). Thus, Burke arrives at the "paradox of substance" where "every positive is a negative"(25). For rhetoric-as-epistemic, truth is paradoxical.

My third point is that meaning or truth is never fixed and and certain, but always dynamic and ambiguous. Understanding and knowledge can only come through interpretation. Brummett, arguing that no one person can create truth through interpretation, writes:

I am not arguing that reality is subjective. The constraints of sensory data are one bond between human beings and one reason why I cannot imagine a tree and have it appear. But sense data by themselves are not experience. Experience is sensation plus meaning. Sensation alone is

meaningless. To all experiences people give meaning. (28,29)
These interpretations can be tested against reality, but that reality is a network of corresponding and conflicting interpretations. Against this network, interpretations can be regarded as true, but since reality is dynamic the truth of any proposition is temporal and never stable. Truth follows from interpretation; it is contingent, not immutable; process, not event.

My fourth point is that knowledge is metaphor. The notions of contextual definition, paradox of substance, and truth-as-process can only be reconciled within an epistemology that views knowledge as metaphor. Burke defines metaphor as "a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that or the thatness of a this"(503). Metaphor is, in other words, a particular "perspective upon" something. It is a "logical contradiction" which equates "is and is-not." In the absence of a fixed, absolute truth, rhetorical epistemology should recognize metaphor as the most pragmatic approximation of knowledge. Burke explains, "It is customary to think that objective reality is dissolved by such relativity of terms as we get through a shifting of perspective. But on the contrary, it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish . . . reality"(504). This shifting of perspective also underlies Paul Ricoeur's concept of metaphor developed in his 1976 book, Interpretation Theory. He defines metaphor as "the appearance of kinship where ordinary vision does not perceive any relationship"(51), and in the same paragraph goes on to call metaphor a "calculated error" and an "apparent misunderstanding"

at odds with "previous systems of classification." Ricoeur's definition, like Burke's, sees metaphor as new knowledge. An epistemology which takes knowledge to be "calculated error" and "apparent misunderstanding" affirms the rhetorical ambiguity of substance, reality, and truth. It takes knowledge to be in process, with the cycle of birth, life and death ongoing within it.

My fifth point turns away from intersubjectivism toward intertextuality. That is, I want to shift the focus away from the interpersonal interaction and toward the interaction between and among texts. Ricoeur, in order to argue that "Writing is the full manifestation of discourse"(25-26), explains that in written discourse

Inscription becomes synonymous with the semantic autonomy of the text, which results from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. The text's career escapes the finite horizons lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it. (29-30)

The written text, unlike the spoken, cannot shuttle back and forth between the speaker and the audience. It is cut off from its producer in a process Ricoeur calls "distanciation," which he describes as "alienation"(38), "estangement"(89), and "atemporalization"(93). Ricoeur explains that a written text "is not primarily a message addressed to a specific range of readers"(37). Writing is "the full manifestation of discourse" because "Only writing, . . . in freeing itself, not only from its author and its originary audience, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse

as projecting a world"(37). The "world" that written texts project, I contend, is the world of knowledge, a world of inscription. The notion of intersubjectivity, as developed by Brummett, does not account for what is perhaps the most serious oversight of rhetorical epistemology: that any field--physics, music, or anthropology--primarily consists of written texts; people are significant primarily in their roles as interpreters and inscribers of texts, as readers and writers. Knowledge is constructed not primarily through dialogue but primarily through writing and reading. Therefore, since no text can announce its meaning unambiguously, since no text has an obvious and univocal meaning, since all texts are polysemic--all knowledge is polysemic. Rhetoric-as-epistemic, then, ought to be more concerned with theories of writing and reading than with theories of speaking and listening.

In my last several minutes, I want to explore three implications of a rhetorical epistemology based on intertextuality as opposed to intersubjectivity. Some may view these three implications as problematic for my theory, but I contend that they can only help the theory find pragmatic applications within the epistemological shifting that is already underway in our post-philosophical environment.

The first implication is that the traditional conception of writing must enlarge. Jacques Derrida, announcing his search for a science of writing in his book Of Grammatology argues that has historically been "gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to . . . the name of writing" and that writing should no longer be considered a

"derivative, auxiliary form of language in general"; in Derrida's scheme of things, "writing . . . comprehends language"(6-7). Derrida wants to consider under the general heading of "writing" any kind of symbolic inscription: cinematography, choreography, painting, music, sculpture, and cybernetics. "Writing" would also include certain modes of speaking, such as the folk tale, the folk song, and the memorized oral history recited by one generation to the next. The result is that "writing" would become a much more comprehensive subject and a much broader and more intricate field than "language" ever has been.

The second implication is that writing itself is "radicalized." If writing is no longer to be considered subordinate to speech and language, we must consider that it has purposes far beyond the clear and effective communication of ideas. Agreeing with Nietzsche, Derrida argues that writing is not "originally subordinate . . . to the logos and to truth"(19). Derrida's rejection of traditional epistemologies corresponds to this essay's earlier assumption for rhetorical epistemology: that truth is never fixed but always dynamic. Derrida points out that the meaning of "the text" becomes enclosed and fixed by "the book," a boundary of meaning imposed on writing--which, in principle, has no beginning or end. He predicts that writing must destroy "the book" to uncover "the text." Writing's primary purpose, then, is to create revolutionary discourse, to deconstruct the boundaries imposed on texts. A text, after all, must be as free of boundaries and limitations as possible in order to find correspondences and oppositions in the intertextual

matrix. Indeed, one boundary from which writing must free itself is the concept of absolute truth.

The third and final implication follows from the second: If grammatology "erases" truth and the logos, it will also "erase" the human, that is, any traditional concept of the human. Derrida proposes that "writing" no longer needs the human, no longer is required to signify human concerns and motives, no longer is linked to human sounds. If "writing," then, can exist without reference to human affairs, we can say that human concerns have been unwritten, erased. Derrida writes:

What writing itself . . . betrays is life. It meanaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit's relationship with itself. It is their end, their finitude, their paralysis. (25)

We can say that "their end" is also the end of logocentrism, the end of the myth that rationality and science comprehend and guide human affairs. The human--as logical, rational substance--may be erased. The human may not be logos but mythos, not actual but virtual, not signified by signifier, not real but metaphoric.

No one can demonstrate whether Derrida's scenario is an inevitability or no more than a remote possibility. But even consideration of the possibility that the human has no substance and is no signified should point out to us that our day is increasingly becoming a post-philosophical day, a day where the search for a single and absolute truth ends and the search for pragmatic alternatives begins anew, a day when a "discourse community" may be seen as a matrix of texts reading and writing one another through the medium of human culture, a day when a text's meaning is presumed to be polysemic and rhetorical as

opposed to obvious and univocal, a day when the words rhetoric and sophistry cease to be signifiers of an unholy signified.

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